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CARNIVAL

Many writers have touched on the Carnival, as it is seen in Brazil, especially in the city of Rio de Janeiro. It is a feature of the national life that cannot be overlooked. There must be considerable sectional differences in the way it is observed. It is said that there are some special features of the Pernambuco Carnival that render it different from any other.

The Carnival is, of course, the same thing as the Mardi Gras observed in New Orleans, and one of the characteristic things in the life of southern Europe, which was incorporated into the life of Latin America. It is the final fling of pleasure before entering on the dreary forty days fast of Lent. That is, that is the theory of it. Actually, it has become a festa in its own right, practically the biggest one in the year. While I don't doubt that the Catholic clergy enjoin on their members the duty of observing the fast of Lent, I never saw any indication that the common people paid the least attention to Lent, or even knew of its existence. Good Friday is observed, as will be noted in another chapter; but not Lent. And so the motive for the Carnival has ceased to exist, for there could be no point in having a final fling before the fast if there were to be no fast. But the evolution of human institutions pays scant regard to logic; and while Lent has passed gradually out of the consciousness of the people, the Carnival has grown more and more in importance.

The Carnival takes various forms. There are dances in all the clubs, and in many private homes. There are parades, with floats of varying degrees of originality and interest, masks and costumes on which a great deal of money is expended, with a view to making them original or beautiful. New popular music of a suitable nature is in demand, and it means a great deal to be the author of a carnival "hit". Every car that will run at all is pressed into service, and the oldest ones are most in demand. Formerly the open cars were preferred, but few of these are left in existence now. The idea is to remove the top, if possible, the doors, and certainly the muffler, deck the car with ribbons or streamers, and pile into it or on it as many people

as it can possibly be made to carry, and then go careening through the streets, blowing the horn, racing the motor, singing, and generally making as much noise as possible, to add to the general confusion. Young men and girls especially favor this aspect of the Carnival. It looks like a perfect picture of innocent gaiety.

But the really characteristic feature of the Carnival in Pernambuco is the passo, the street dancing. Fazer o passo -- make the step -- is to take part in this dancing, and all classes, from the highest to the lowest, do this, though it is the special prerogative of the lower classes. There is a large Negro element in Pernambuco, and there is said to be a wild abandon in this street dancing, such as is not to be found elsewhere in Brazil. Here is a band playing, a little farther up the street is another, and others in succession, and the street filled from side to side with men and women, boys and girls, crowded together so closely that there is scarcely room to dance. There is a peculiar, barbaric rhythm to the music used for this dancing. It isn't at all hard to shut your eyes and imagine yourself in the jungles of Africa, or some other savage place.

The Carnival comes in the hottest season of the year, when the sun at noon is directly overhead. The stores are all closed, of course, for these three days, and the dancing starts about noon, and goes on all through the afternoon and all night long. I have seen young men, almost naked, dancing in the street at noon, in that incredibly hot tropical sun. And as the afternoon advances the crowd grows, and the dancers go on, dancing men and women in close proximity, masked, and in semi-darkness, through the heat of the tropical night, to the unceasing beat of the music. Liquor is plentiful. A generous glass of aguardente can be had for what one pays for a bottle of soda water here. And while there is not very much drunkenness according to the so-called Kentucky standard, that doesn't consider a man drunk as long as he can move his finger, there is still a great deal more than it is pleasant to see.

It is said that the whole nation takes off its moral brakes during Carnival. While the respectable people continue to do things in a respectable way, it is nevertheless true that the bars are let down, and more liberties permitted with

regard to all conventions, than at any other time. And while many things are done in a spirit of innocent fun, it would be inconceivable that the combination of a hot tropical night, the dancing in close proximity, the masquerade, behind which one's sense of individual responsibility is lost, the alcohol, and the general feeling of removal of restraint, should not result in excesses of sexual vice. It does, in fact. It is a matter of common talk that the crop of babies, especially from unmarried mothers, is greatest just about nine months after the Carnival. Many young men seek to make as many conquests as possible during that time, and some even prepare themselves for it by renting rooms conveniently located in the part of the city where the activity is greatest, to which they can withdraw with a girl without having to seek a more formal place. A friend of mine, who found it necessary to be in the city once at Carnival time, sought lodging at a family hotel. The landlady, before accepting him, made plain to him that hers was a decent house, and that he was to bring no women there. Her attitude makes plain enough how common and well recognized is the custom.

Some of the Carnival music is quite catchy and pretty; but almost all of it, and certainly that most used in the Carnival, has a characteristic rhythm, and a lack of a definite ending. It is made to be played on and on. An Englishwoman whom I knew in Recife, an accomplished musician, called this aspect of it to my attention. The Carnival music, she said, may begin, or quit; but it never seems to come to an end, as other music may be said to do. It is this very quality of it that makes it suitable for the Carnival.

Religious leaders are united in condemning the Carnival. In Pernambuco there is a considerable Protestant element, resulting from Protestant missionary work there, and both Protestant ministers and Catholic priests denounce the Carnival as sinful and dangerous. But the overwhelming bulk of the people give little heed to such admonitions. Julio Diniz, the Portuguese novelist, in one of his books tells of the Carnival in Lisbon, and expresses the belief that the majority of people taking part in it did not enjoy it, but felt that it was something that everybody did, and that therefore they were supposed to do it. I cannot say to

what extent that would be true of the Carnival in Brazil. Sensible people deride the foolish things done in the Carnival; but when the time comes, most of them are to be found taking part in it.

One ever present feature of the Carnival is the lança-perfume, a sort of seltzer bottle, with a mixture of water, alcohol and ether, with a bit of perfume in it, which is sprayed in the faces of fellow revelers, especially women. Stories are told of people's eyes being injured by it. On the morning after, the streets are littered with these empty bottles. In recent years the men have taken to carrying flour, or some similar substance, or even a thin flour paste, and smearing the faces and hair of other men, especially any acquaintance who might be seen on the street not dressed in Carnival attire. The play gets pretty rough at times. But a mere observer is usually safe. Of course, if it were known that one was there as an observer, to write up the Carnival, he might be pretty roughly handled; but after all, the interest of the revelers is principally in their fellow revelers, and especially in their friends and acquaintance, and anyone who mingles unobtrusively in the crowd is usually left unmolested.

People do get out of hand sometimes, especially when the cachaca flows too freely. The police are on duty, of course, and a man who misbehaves is taken to jail, where he is held until noon on Ash Wednesday, the day after the close of the Carnival, and then released, still in his Carnival clothes, to make his way home amid the guffaws of the passers-by. That is considered punishment enough -- and it certainly seems to fit the crime.